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AUTHOR Cross, William M.
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ABSTRACT

The emphasis of sociology as an academic discipline tends to reflect social conditions at any given time. This has been especially true since the early 1960s. Sociology course offerings during the period from World War I through the 1960s were theoretical and empirical, with the social problems emphasis placed in areas of social work and related disciplines. When relevance was emphasized during the 1960s courses on poverty, stratification, and mental illness were introduced into the curriculum. Three recently-developed courses in the sociology department of Illinois College reflect this trend. Problems of senior citizens, drug abuse, and alcoholism were treated early in the century by private institutions. However, growing concern by interest groups has brought these problems to widespread public attention, and two courses were recently established at Illinois College to study them. In addition to being relevant to community problems, the courses increase career options for students who take them. A similar course on the sociology of work and industry has been introduced to help sociology majors prepare to seek jobs in the field. In the development of the courses, networks of the author's personal acquaintances in the community and in the sociology profession were integral in locating teaching staff and guest speakers. (AV)

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The Growing Edge of Sociology: New and Emerging Courses in the Discipline.

by

William M. Cross, Ph.D.

Sociology Department, Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois 62650

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"The Growing Edge of Sociology: new and emerging courses in the discipline". Author: William M. Cross, Ph.D., Sociology Department, Illinois College, Jacksonville, Illinois 62650.

Disciplines tend to reflect the society of which they are part. Sociology as a late comer to academe peculiarly reflects its context. At its inception on the campus of the University of Chicago and for some 25-30 years thereafter, the social problems focus was evident. Undesirable societal conditions, such as crime, poverty and social disorganization, to name a few, needed treatment. Courses were set up to focus attention on not only what were felt to be the problems themselves, but proper and appropriate treatment of such problems. The trend of course offerings in the period from World War I on to the 1960s tended to be of a more theoretical and empirical sort, with the social problems emphasis and problems-type courses shifting over to the area of social work and related disciplines. The 1960s saw the return of an emphasis to relevance, and courses of various types such as poverty, stratification, and mental illness differentiated out from the more traditional course curriculum.

It is the author's thesis that the problems emphasis has appeared in a new form in the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, on into the present. How to explain this new development, or rather a new version of a periodic development? One suggested explanation is that of social movements. Various groups have become sufficiently aroused about what they have come to feel are certain social prob-

lems, that influential persons take up the cause and move for treatment. In the past, particularly in the period 1890-1920, private benefactors concerned about such problems funded various attempts to treat such items as delinquency. Pressure groups in the recent past and into the present have been able to arouse some such interest, but they have moved into the political realm, obtaining grant monies to further various types of treatment as well as research. Funds also were made available from the federal government for the funding, at least in part, of those wanting to study such problem areas, and to specialize in their treatment.

It is possible to structure course differentiation reflecting such trends and developments by looking at the specific situation of west central Illinois. Illinois College up until 1976 had a basic, traditional set of sociology course offerings- Family, Social Work, Criminology, Social Research, Sociological Theory, Urban Sociology, and Introductory Sociology. There had been a growing concern in the community that aging was a social problem. This feeling was of such strength that considerable private monies from labor unions in the area had been put into the construction of low cost housing for the aging. Federal monies were obtained for the erection of several high rises. A number of cottages were built, both in the city of Jacksonville and in smaller towns in the area. A course was proposed and passed through the Illinois College faculty without any serious obstacles,

largely because of the feeling that aging was seen as a serious social problem meriting not only treatment but inclusion into the curriculum as a permanent course. Several specific reasons entered in to the situation as well. One was the fact that a local person, trained in sociology and having a long period of service in the state department of aging was retiring and willing to teach the course. Another reason was that having a course in aging, coupled with the possibility of field work in this course area, would enable students taking the course, particularly sociology majors, to have one additional career option. So, from looking at the differentiation of an aging course from the area of family, we can observe a pattern. A subarea of a traditional course area (namely that of family) is seen as a problem area, not only nationally, but also by locals. Treatment is given, first of all by influential private persons (such as a local church-related home for the aging). Later, the problem is felt to be of such a serious nature that national attention and federal funds are devoted to treatment. Finally, because of this rising interest, but also because of employment possibilities in the field, a course in the area under question is structured. A syllabus is enclosed as an apppendix, describing the outline and specific nature of the aging course.

This pattern of course development mentioned above also applies to the differentiation of another course at Illinois

College. Drug addiction and alcoholism have long been seen as problems, sub-parts of traditional course areas such as crime and deviance. During the formative period of sociology such problems were seen as urgent, particularly by private groups of individuals. For a long time, treatment was seen as the realm of private groups of concerned persons. Federal and state monies were available and budgeted, but only generally for the suppression of addiction and alcoholism, which were defined as forms of crime. In the recent past, this situation has changed. These problems have been redefined as forms of disease requiring treatment. Treatment is so important it should be funded not only by private foundations and agencies, but also by federal and state budgets. Sub-departments of other agencies have been entrusted with grant monies to further more effective treatment. These problems have been taken from police jurisdiction and relegated to special agencies. Such a process is in evidence in the city of Jacksonville. Treatment of alcoholics was dealt with by means of a privately funded agency from 1968 to 1973. At that time via state grants coming ultimately from the federal government, the staff was greatly expanded, nearly quadrupled, with the acquisition of a treatment facility. Formal staff training and reporting of case loads and activity was accomplished. The teaching of courses in the area of alcoholism and addiction and their treatment began in the fall of 1975 at MacMurray College, and the following

year at Illinois College, which has the course now as a permanent part of its curriculum. What circumstances brought about the structuring of this course? We can see that the pattern is similar to that of the development of the Aging course. The course area was perceived as a social problem by influentials, who sought to treat the problem with private means. Not until considerably later were the two problem areas of alcoholism and addiction seen as illnesses requiring treatment rather than punishment. The college faculty felt that there was justification for such a course 1) that the course was of sufficient interest 2) that there was staff available from the alcoholism treatment center to properly teach the course 3) that training in this course area would offer an additional career option to the student body generally and particularly to students having sociology and psychology majors.

Another and distinctively different course differentiation emerged during the last year at this same (Illinois) College. There had been a course entitled "Sociology of Work and Industry" which had earlier been traded off for another course. A number of faculty felt concern that the number of students not being able to make appropriate use of their degrees was growing. This concern was sparked partly by the fact that the number of teacher candidates readily obtaining employment was declining. A large number

of students had majors in such field as history and English and surveys of alumni with such majors were found to have not fared well as far as career plans were concerned. Faculty from both the Sociology and Business departments shared concern for what can be seen as the problem of unemployment or perhaps better stated, underemployment. Unemployment has been seen as a problem of national scope ever since the Depression. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, unemployment has been seen as an urgent problem of college graduates. The Illinois College faculty agreed with this feeling, and made the Career Opportunities course part of its permanent curriculum. The basic content of this course is as follows. The first several weeks of the course are devoted to the presentation of current job information. This is done both by bringing in guest speakers knowledgable in areas of job growth and opportunity, but also by alerting students as to how they may use library resources most effectively, in order to be fully aware of various career options and alternatives. Considerable attention is given to the writing and development of the resume. Thirdly, much attention is given to the interview. Employers who actually interview college students are brought in, to alert the student to what the employer desires. In-class simulations are conducted by means of role playing, with students alternatively taking the role of employer and employee. One-on-one simulations of real interviews are set up, both on and off campus. Grading focuses largely on resume writing and interview per-

formance. Finally, guest speakers describe how they improve their skills. Others describe their shifting to second careers. Women tell how they have shifted from being housewives to being career persons.

Reference theory has special relevance to these three courses. In all these cases the college faculty refered to a social problems motif in interpreting the importance of the problem area under consideration. The situation at the time the course was structured shows orientation to the reference situation. Reference persons involved were those proposing the course, and those willing and able to staff the courses. Interests and needs of students show forth students as a reference group in addition to core groups initially interested in the problem areas.

Network theory also holds meaning as an explanation of course differentiation. The author was at least initially part of the Council on Aging in its initial stage of development. He has also an interest in the field of Gerontology, has attended national workshops in this area, and has supervised students involved in seminars and independent study. Via the networks of the college faculty, it became known to him that the husband of a faculty member had been involved as a staff person in the state department of aging, as well as possessing a sociology degree at the M.A. level. The author has been chairman of the personnel committee of the local

alcoholism treatment agency. Such involvement provided knowledge of persons with expertise for teaching courses in the area of alcoholism and addiction, as well as enlisting support of the executive committee of the treatment agency to this end. Finally, in reference to the careers course, network theory can be seen to have special relevance. Networks of persons in national firms having local representatives known to the author have been tapped as resource persons. Networks in which the author is involved, particularly friendship and acquaintanceship groupings, have provided resources, especially for job interviewing procedures and information. The considerable network of persons in local human service agencies have enabled structuring of field work and apprenticeship programs making it possible for students to obtain considerable experience in the areas of human services and business prior to graduation. Particularly relevant and helpful to the careers course is the extensive network of alumni, both recent and farther along, who have been able and willing to give advice and counsel with regard to career alternatives and possibilities.

General systems theory, with its emphasis on the encoding of information, suggests that course differentiation can be understood in the light of new information about what is felt by society to be of interest, and what areas have new and emerging career possibilities.